

VZCZCXRO8913
PP RUEHDBU
DE RUEHMO #4347/01 2481455
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 051455Z SEP 07
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3540
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 004347

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/05/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [RS](#)

SUBJECT: COMMUNIST PARTY TAKES TO DUMA ELECTION TRAIL

Classified By: PolCouns Alice G. Wells for reason 1.4(b and d).

11. 1. (C) SUMMARY. Gennadiy Zyuganov, the Chairman of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), headlined a press conference on August 29 to launch the 2007 Duma campaign. He and other party leaders took an often defiant tone for what may be the strongest political organization in opposition, taking the government to task for manipulating the electoral process and criticizing the Kremlin-backed leftist party, "Just Russia" (SR). Later that day, KPRF First Deputy Secretary Ivan Melnikov shared with Embassy his concerns about the lack of transparency in the democratic process, the lack of access to the media, and worries about the Kremlin's misuse of administrative resources to benefit the "parties of power" -- United Russia and Just Russia. Given the KPRF's surprising gains in the March regional elections; unanticipated increases in the Party's financial resources; and the shifting political landscape, the stage may be set for a stronger than expected showing for the KPRF in the coming election.
END SUMMARY

Off and Running

2) The KPRF leadership used the press conference to announce the date of their party conference -- September 22 -- and the list of candidates for the top three slots on the national slate. The latter offered no surprises, with Zyuganov heading the list with unanimous support from all regional parties, followed by Nobel Prize Winner Zhores Alferov; Melnikov; former cosmonaut and Duma deputy Svetlana Savitskaya; and party deputy chairman Vladimir Kashin. Two other contenders, Duma deputies Viktor Ilyusin and Nikolay Kharitonov, also made the list but have little chance of being included in the top three. Melnikov publicly underscored the democratic process that brought these candidates to the fore, noting that the list resulted from the work of regional conferences over the summer and represented the desires of the party membership.

13. (U) Zyuganov at the press conference came out swinging, referring to Just Russia as a party of "turncoats, traitors, and cast-offs" and downplayed concerns about losing members to the KPRF's leftist competitors. Melnikov accused SR of stealing the KPRF platform and even its symbols, showing an image of a SR political placard featuring an icebreaker that bears close resemblance to a propaganda poster used by the Communists in last year's campaign.

KPRF Promoting Transparency, Open Access to Media

14. (U) At the press conference, Central Committee Secretary Vadim Solovyev gave an impassioned critique of the electoral

process, harkening back to international condemnation of the 2003 elections as "unfair and not in conjunction with international norms" and then argued that current conditions were far worse. He despaired of the new election laws which, in his opinion, violate the main democratic principle -- "all candidates and parties should compete on a level playing field." Three issues were particularly vexing to the KPRF: the inclusion of governors and ministers on United Russia (UR) party lists, which then turn the levers of influence of those offices to benefit the candidates; UR's "monopoly" control of the regional electoral commissions; and unequal access to the media. For the latter, he asserted that 70 percent of television political programming was reserved for United Russia, while any reporting on the KPRF was generally negative.

15. (C) Behind closed doors, Melnikov continued along those lines. His defense of electoral transparency, the need for clear democratic procedures, and promotion of a traditional "social democratic" agenda may have been tuned to the ear of his interlocutors, but sounded closer to the policies of European mainstream leftist politicians than the inheritors of Lenin's legacy. He underscored the KPRF's opposition to the changes in the electoral law and the emergence of a new system that appears tilted to benefit United Russia. In particular he condemned the new bar of 7% for a party's accession to the Duma as contrary to the interest of developing a diverse political structure.

16. (C) Melnikov despaired of not being able to reach a broader audience through the mass media. On the most important medium, television, he said that REN TV "tried" to provide more objective coverage, but that all other channels were solidly in the UR camp. He predicted -- correctly -- that none of the main stations would publicize the morning's

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press conference. He also claimed that the KPRF also had difficulty with the print media, in part because Mironov was using SR's comparatively stronger war chest to "buy up" articles.

17. (U) Despite its problems with media access, analysis by the independent Politcom.ru and PR company Medialogiya shows that total press coverage (print, radio, and television) for the KPRF does not lag all that far behind UR. Indeed, during the last week of August, the survey found 766 citations about the KPRF vice 825 for United Russia. Moreover, when assessing the tone and significance of the material covered, Politcom.ru gave the KPRF top billing for the week -- in part because of Zyuganov's strong showing at the press conference.

Reaching the Under-30 Crowd

18. (C) When looking at the electoral landscape, Melnikov saw the core of KPRF support coming primarily from "middle aged" Russians, aged 40-50, whose childhood experiences during the late Brezhnev/Gorbachev period continue to draw them to the party. He noted that this generation is looking to the future when they too will have to live on their pensions and see the KPRF as perhaps the best defender of those interests. Melnikov also took particular pride that, as he claimed, the party has allegedly attracted the most educated part of the population and he pointed to the academic accreditations of the party's elite. (His staff assistant modestly pointed out that Melnikov himself has a doctorate.) When questioned about the youth vote, Melnikov admitted that his party has a challenge in reaching out to that segment of the electorate. He expressed his belief that most of the under-30 electorate was apolitical and thus largely irrelevant in the coming Duma elections.

19. (U) The KPRF campaign kick-off followed on the heels of two incidents that seem to strike at the party's ability to

attract and retain younger voters: the reported defection at their late August conference of more than half of the Union of Communist Youth to the rival Just Russia party and a well-publicized street fight between young KPRF members and the SR's "Young Guard" in Moscow on 20 August. The challenge of explaining the KPRF's take on those incidents at the press conference fell to Yuriy Afonin, the First Secretary of the Union of Communist Youth. For the former, Afonin underscored that the break within the youth group reflected an earlier split in 2004, when the then head of the organization Konstantin Zhukov announced his defection to Patriotic Russia. Thus, as Afonin argued, the more recent schism does not really represent any change in the expected voting support from the Union's membership. The latter incident he dismissed as merely provocation, but promised that the Communist youth would be ready to rebuff future pressure.

Signs of Growing Strength?

¶10. (U) Data released by the Central Election Commission on political financing during the second quarter of 2007 showed an unexpected increase in KPRF revenues, moving the party to third place: behind the Kremlin-backed parties, but ahead of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and the other smaller competitors. KPRF officials have long pleaded poverty as one of the weaknesses of the party, preferring to characterize their political successes as a "David vs. Goliath"-type victory against the Kremlin-backed parties. Indeed Zyuganov publicly extolled the contribution of membership dues as the primary source of funding for the party, even as Melnikov admitted privately that they provide only six percent of party revenues.

¶11. (U) While the KPRF continues to lag far behind the front-runners in its ability to attract political revenues, the increase in financial support suggests that some members of the elite who are unable to find a place in the parties of power may be looking at the KPRF as the best bet in the coming election. We cannot rule out that some of the financing came indirectly from government sources, as some in the Kremlin see the benefit of the KPRF as a largely harmless outlet for opposition.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Whereas a year ago, there were doubts that the KPRF would make the 7% electoral threshold for the Duma, it appears that the party stands in a good position for the coming elections. The unanticipated increases in the Party's financial resources and the shifting political landscape before the elections provide an opportunity for the KPRF to consolidate its position in the Duma and, perhaps, as the strongest opposition organization in the country.

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(Independent pollster Levada in late August shoed the KPRF as drawing 18% of the population that intends to vote in the Duma election; a distant second place behind UR, but with twice the support of SR.) END COMMENT.
Burns